

Mohawk Valley Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On March 15, 2023, Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at their campus in Utica, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, MVCC convened approximately 95 residents, including both virtual and in-person attendees.

Overview of Responses

Event attendees participated in facilitated discussions on barriers to internet access and digital equity in their communities. A brief summary of comments shared in response to each discussion prompt appears below.

Question 1: In your experience, what kinds of locations in your community are most important for accessing the internet?

Participants shared that they access the internet at home, at a workplace, at a library or community center, in private businesses like coffee shops, and at friends' or neighbors' homes. Other institutions that were named included places of worship, colleges, school grounds, parks, government facilities, and hospitals. For participants who knew of community members who could not access internet at home, lack of available service, high costs, low-quality service, and lack of digital literacy were identified as barriers. It was noted that service providers often do not prioritize high-quality coverage in low-income and vulnerable communities. The lack of flexibility of internet service plans was also noted as a barrier, with one participant wishing they could function more like minutes of phone service, with pricing scaling up and down with usage.

Question 2: In your experience, which of the following factors make it hard for people in your community to access and use the internet?

Residents identified a lack of high quality and reliable service, a lack of digital literacy skills training, difficulty accessing devices, lack of affordable service, hard-to-use online resources, and concerns around digital safety as regional barriers to connectivity. It was noted that high internet and phone costs can force residents to choose between broadband and phone service. Participants flagged the difficulty in accessing resources and websites from mobile devices. Many sites are not geared towards phone accessibility, and it was noted that many aging individuals do not have up-to-date desktop or laptop access and are mostly utilizing their phones for connectivity.

Question 3: What everyday activities do you/members of your community regularly use the internet for?

Residents shared that they use the internet to access healthcare and public benefits, to work/make money, to access education, to socialize and engage in their neighborhoods, and to access online financial/banking tools.

Question 4: What are community members' experiences when it comes to accessing public resources online?

Residents noted that a vast range of services have gone 100% online since COVID, which excludes many people with limited access or digital literacy. Residents stressed the need for phone help lines to help people navigate these online resources and urged that the phone lines should not be fully automated. Librarian participants expressed that they see many navigating these sites through phones, but the government portals are not mobile-friendly, resulting in confusion and inaccessibility. It was flagged that these sites are often not oriented to pair with accessibility accommodations, making them challenging to navigate for those with visual impairments. Participants noted that a streamlined interface or uniformity across sites would increase accessibility for those with limited digital literacy. There was frustration around non-linear navigation pathways on public sites making it hard for users to understand where to go for necessary information and services.

The inaccessibility of these sites with limited translation services for non-native English speakers was also raised as a concern.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Residents expressed concern about cybersecurity and lack of media literacy and shared stories of times they or their friends and family have experienced online fraud.

Question 6: What would you prioritize for improvement for those who have internet access in your community?

Respondents primarily suggested that access, affordability, and speed and reliability of internet service should be priorities for closing the digital divide.

Summary Discussion

Participants identified the need for internet for a variety of uses including economic opportunity, healthcare, and public resources. The biggest barriers to access identified were quality of service and a lack of digital literacy training. Residents asked that the state help encourage full coverage across the region, including in rural communities. Residents are also looking for more diversity of providers to increase the quality and cost of service.